

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

## Review Essay : Youth and Values in Post-Soviet Cuba

Härkönen, Heidi Kristiina

2016

---

Härkönen , H K 2016 , ' Review Essay : Youth and Values in Post-Soviet Cuba ' , Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society , vol. 41 , no. 3 , pp. 69-74 . <  
<https://journal.fi/suomenantropologi/article/view/60340> >

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/231164>

---

cc\_by\_nc  
publishedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

# REVIEW ESSAY: YOUTH AND VALUES IN POST-SOVIET CUBA

BLUM, DENISE F. *Cuban Youth & Revolutionary Values: Educating the New Socialist Citizen*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. 286 p. ISBN: 978-0-292-72260-6 (hardcover), 978-0-292-73748-8 (softcover).

DAIGLE, MEGAN. *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. 296 p. ISBN: 978-0-520-28298-8 (softcover).

Reformist governments often embrace youth as the ‘malleable clay’ (Guevara 2005 [1965]: 27) on which to inculcate new thoughts and practices. Youth are seen as being at the forefront of changing values, whether in a positive sense as open to fresh ideas or negatively, as embracing too willingly detrimental new influences.

Contemporary Cuba is a particularly interesting place to explore transforming values because during recent decades its socialist society has become increasingly shaped by neoliberal influences. When the Soviet Union fell in the 1990s, Cuba experienced a profound crisis that forced the government to make several concessions in its earlier ideology. Prior to 1991, 85% of Cuba’s foreign trade took place within the European socialist block (Eckstein 1994: 89–91). Deprived of its most important allies, the Cuban government was forced to drastically cut back many of its earlier social services and material contributions to the population. Heightened monetisation and intensified globalisation started to shape life on the island. The opening of the country to tourism, the increasing importance of private commerce and consumption, wide-spread black markets and the important role of remittances

all played a part in accentuating older, pre-revolutionary divides along wealth and race lines. The government saw these changes as bringing about a crisis in values, particularly in young people’s attitudes toward socialism, work, love, sex and material possessions.

Both of these books explore the consequences of Cuba’s large-scale transformations and the value changes they have created amongst young people. Anthropologist Denise F. Blum approaches values through a historical-ethnographic study of Cuba’s education system throughout the revolutionary era from 1959 until the early 2000s. Political scientist Megan Daigle, on the other hand, examines young people’s views on sex and money in Havana in the 1990s and 2000s.

Blum asks whether Cuba’s socialist system has managed to create values among the young that are altruistic and socially responsible in contrast to the individualism and consumerism nurtured by capitalism. Through a focus on secondary education, she examines how socialist ideology, *conciencia* (conscience), is taught and how young Cubans understand it. Blum’s research took place in the late 1990s at a time of exceptionally low secondary school enrollment rates. The government places special emphasis

on schooling to inculcate revolutionary values in future socialist generations, so the fact that youth at the time were increasingly opting out of studying is a serious problem for the revolution.

Blum's research is based on extensive fieldwork in two secondary schools in Havana: one a socialist vanguard institution and the other a relatively marginalised school, situated in a poor, mostly Afro-Cuban neighbourhood. A focus on these two institutions gives Blum a view of Cuba's intensified class and racial inequalities during the post-Soviet era. At the Afro-Cuban school, students learned as much from their family members and community as from their formal schooling. To get by, people often drew on informal practices and resources, such as *santería* and sex work. In the elite school, the emphasis was on formal education. Many students had access to remittances and their parents were employed in the tourist sector that provides relatively good salaries. However, while material insufficiencies were felt more acutely at the Afro-Cuban school, Blum's interlocutors did not see themselves as victims but as agents who are better at surviving hardships than more privileged Cubans.

As a central part of her research, Blum assisted 'school to the countryside' (p. 178) trips in which all Cuban schools participate. Such trips are officially voluntary but in practice students experience great pressure to participate. This practice is based on the government's principle of combining academic study with manual labour as a way to create equality between workers in society and inculcate in children a love of work and the socialist nation. Blum sees the work-study principle as both ideologically and economically central to the Cuban educative system. This principle draws on Marx, Lenin, Engels and José Martí and highlights the transformative potential of work

(a thought that was already present in John Locke's writings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century).

Drawing on political scientist Damián J. Fernández's (2000) views, Blum argues that socialist education is about creating a national identity of *Cubanidad* based on affect. Cuban politics is a political religion that gains its force from performativity, with the work-study principle as the main source of affective national attachment. She suggests that the Cuban education system has made students more responsible and collective than American teenagers in terms of embracing values such as equality, solidarity and group responsibility (p. 189, p. 195). Through its educative system, the revolution has managed to inculcate in Cubans an emotional attachment to nationalism and the revolutionary leaders.

Nevertheless, the economic difficulties of the post-Soviet era have left their mark on all Cubans. The island's material scarcities and inequalities create tensions, frustration and new desires. Due to this situation, Blum argues, Cubans live in a double consciousness that stems from a contradictory political and economic reality that demands contradictory values to succeed. Double standards exist in many spheres of life that require Cubans to be loyal socialists whilst simultaneously engaging in capitalist strategies as a way to get by. Blum states that Cubans have internalised both socialism and capitalism to an extent that creates 'an almost schizophrenic identity' (p. 213). This double consciousness has created 'a whole new way of life or culture' (p. 209), with youth at the forefront of such developments.

For Blum, double consciousness creates both stability and change: 'it is the authoritative and immutable rhetoric that provides a haven for the spontaneity and creativity spawned in everyday life' (p. 201). Cubans insert personal

meanings into official practices and discourses. For instance, students organised parties in the midst of their labour-focused agricultural trips. At the same time as contributing to official ideology, such personalised practices transform the officialised sphere. Values are learned at the intersection of officialised and personalised spheres.

Even though Blum highlights the political and economic contradictions of post-Soviet Cuba, she does not embrace a too simplified dichotomisation. She sees Cubans today as presenting a complex combination of new and old values, of socialism and capitalism, urbanism and rural influences, and a flexible inventiveness that creates 'negotiable identities' (p. 210). This view resonates with Laurie A. Fredrik's (2005) notion of *Hombre Novísimo* (on which Blum draws) and Sean Brotherton's (2014) understanding of Cubans' pragmatic subjectivities. Such conceptualisations emphasise Cubans' flexible ability to adapt to both socialist and capitalist understandings in pursuing their life projects. While such an emphasis on pragmatism often risks overshadowing the many forms of genuine warmth and friendliness that shape Cubans' social and national attachments, Blum recognises the importance of her interlocutors' affective commitments to both the revolution and each other.

In her account, Blum pays attention to gendered and racialised differences. She is also sensitive to the subtleties of language and reflects on her own position as an ethnographer. However, despite Blum's rich ethnography, more than half the book comprises general background data on Cuban history and the education system. While this information is useful, for me the truly interesting part of the book starts in Chapter 5, when Blum engages with her own ethnographic material; the greatest merits of the book lie in the fascinating

descriptions that Blum provides from the classroom, school field trips and daily life in Havana. There is an interesting appendix on Blum's fieldwork process, which could have been included in more central sections.

In her theoretical approach, Blum draws on an interdisciplinary perspective. In addition to anthropologists, the book is directed to educators and policy makers with tips on how to involve school children in community development projects (p. 19). This approach perhaps explains the book's occasionally somewhat messy theoretical engagements. For instance, although Blum centrally discusses the Cuban government's efforts to create a 'new personality' (p. 5–6) through its idea of the socialist New Man, in order to understand Cuban young people she draws on psychology that does not take into account a historically and culturally contingent subjectivity. A more anthropologically oriented discussion on youth, personhood and coming-of age would have brought analytical depth to the question of youth development and value change.

In a similar vein, I would have wanted to read a more thorough discussion on the particularities of political affect in Cuba. Affect and emotion are historically, socially and culturally specific phenomena, as several scholars have shown. My own research (Härkönen 2016) suggests both the state and individuals importantly draw on kinship terminology and an idea of the state as a family in conceptualising the national community: it is the idea of a family-like attachment that brings the particular emotional aspect to politics, nationalism and *Cubanidad*.

While Blum explores young people's lives by concentrating on a central revolutionary institution, Daigle focuses on the informal sphere to examine how post-Soviet Cuba's political and economic changes have shaped their lives, values

and experiences of fading socialism. Her focus is on popular and political understandings and practices of *jineterismo*—in this context referring primarily to sexual relations between Cuban women and foreign men—and in particular its expressions in the figure of the sexualised and sensualised *mulata*. In her approach, Daigle draws on both political science and ethnography to bring the perspectives of Afro-Cuban women to the discussion of the meaning of *jineterismo* to contemporary Cuba's political climate.

Daigle's book is shaped chronologically, following her ethnographic experience in Cuba. She discusses the idea of mixed-race women historically, the perspectives of young people engaged in *jineterismo* and acts of state repression towards Cuban women engaging in sexual-affective relations with foreigners. She also explores the views of state authorities on *jineteras* as moral problems for the revolution and the meanings that young women's acts of *jineterismo* hold for both themselves and for Cuban politics. Daigle argues convincingly that Cuba's post-Soviet era changes have had gendered and racialised effects. Both now and in the past, black and *mulata* women have suffered from state violence more than others. *Jineterismo* allows young women to survive scarcity, help their families, meet new people and obtain luxuries such as restaurant dinners and even migration abroad. In Daigle's view, *jineterismo* can be understood as a form of resistance towards the state's demands of austerity and endless sacrifices during the Special Period of extreme poverty in the 1990s. As *jineterismo* provides women with both an alternative income and an alternative life style that allows them to reject state ideals of socialist women, it constitutes in Daigle's view a powerful form of resistance that creates a new ethics of the self. Daigle stresses the role of *jineterismo* as a way for her interlocutors to reject 'paternalist'

(p. 233) state care. In engaging in relationships with foreigners, young women are taking active advantage of the cultural imagery of the sensuous *mulata* and using it to their own advantage. Daigle highlights sexuality as a way for her interlocutors to pursue their own pleasure, escape from social pressures and material deficiencies, resist state forms of subjection and pursue alternative sources of care and community.

It is refreshing that Daigle highlights the agency and positive aspects that *jineterismo* creates for her interlocutors instead of focusing on sex work as exploitation. However, while Daigle examines the troubles that Cubans encounter at the hands of state authorities and the ugly side of Cuba's socialist control of its population, the book lacks discussion on the ugly aspects of women's encounters with their foreign partners. Daigle states that she omitted the perspectives of the foreign men because she wanted to focus on the views of Cuban women, which is understandable. Nevertheless, I was left wondering about the dark side of women's encounters with foreigners. The problem of highlighting *jineterismo* as a women's way to gain agency risks creating a liberation story whereby, with the decline of the socialist state, women are left free to pursue 'the relationships they want' (p. 214) by engaging in sexual-economic exchanges with wealthier, foreign men. Even though *jineterismo* creates a certain agency for women, it is a very limited agency if women are only able to pursue their desires through their sexual relations with men. While Cuba's large-scale transformations are allowing people new ways to generate income as state care crumbles, these changes are highly problematic. As institutionalised services are dismantled, instead of depending on state care many women now face greater dependence on individual men in their pursuit of livelihood

(Härkönen 2015). Cuba's shift from socialism towards a more capitalist society is not an unambiguous liberation story but, rather, one creating new kinds of dependencies and power relations. Moreover, the framing of resistance is problematic due to the question of intention. If Daigle's interlocutors do not seek to resist state policies with their practices but just to pursue their own well-being, should we understand their acts as resistance? Is *jineterismo* a way to resist state care or, rather, a reaction to state services that have for a long time been too deficient and insufficient to meet individuals' day-to-day needs?

Daigle sees socialism as being engaged in acts of subjectification that are intended to mould Cubans into specific kinds of selves: hard-working, dignified and committed to making personal sacrifices for the greater collective good. Nevertheless, Daigle's young interlocutors take pleasure in the new experiences of individuality, autonomy and material rewards that *jineterismo* brings them. She states:

[T]he women I interviewed are repositioning themselves within the sexual-affective economy of Cuba as authors of their own subjectivities, values, and desires by pursuing their own pleasure and well-being. Cuban women need the space and language to express their sexualities in ways that, as of now, are not permitted outside the tropes of the committed, heterosexual wife and mother of a Cuban man. (p. 228)

Subjectivity is a tricky issue. All cultural and political formations shape our subjectivity, not just socialism: embracing greater individual autonomy and capitalist desires are a particular form of subject formation. Despite Cuba's contemporary changes, it has a long history as a socialist country that also has a bearing

on understandings of politics, economics and subjects in contemporary Cuba. On the basis of my research (Härkönen 2016), there is more ambiguity and space within Cuban ideas of a being a mother and a wife than Daigle believes. Many heterosexual women are not so committed in their relationships. For practically all my female interlocutors, motherhood was central to their ideas of self but this did not prevent them from being sexual beings in their relationships with men. It is problematic to expect categorisations that draw on 'Western' ideas of gender, such as a contradiction between 'mothers' and 'sexually active women', to be meaningful to people in diverse societies. Many Cubans that I know embrace a more relational understanding of personhood than the modern, liberalist-capitalist views of subjects. In that case, while autonomy is welcome, relationships are vital and central to one's subjectivity.

Daigle admits that despite her ethnographic research orientation, her intention is not to create a comprehensive anthropological account. Since ethnography has nowadays become a popular method in the social sciences and humanities across the scale, I was left wondering about the relationship between ethnography and anthropology. Traditionally in anthropological fieldwork, the goal is to have long-term lasting relationships with one's research participants. I understand Daigle's encounters were brief due to the difficulty of her topic. Nevertheless this approach leaves her interlocutors quite detached from their everyday relationships such as family networks and possibly gives us an image of *jineterismo* as more liberating and voluntary than it is in some cases. It would be interesting to see her interlocutors in the course of their other daily activities. This issue with the depth of one's ethnographic material is related to wider questions that trouble our current era of favouring multidisciplinary endeavours. In



my view, some aspects of the critical potential of ethnography get lost if ethnography becomes a method that is detachable from wider anthropological theory. I see ethnography as a powerful way to question one's own taken-for-granted assumptions about the world—such as the nature of subjects—and thereby as epistemologically central to anthropology. Nevertheless, in other sciences the questions are quite different. To what degree is ethnography 'ethnography' if it leaves anthropology?

Ultimately, however, the volume is beautifully written and provides fascinating, detailed descriptions of events as they unfold. Daigle is a vivid observer and her book is a pleasure to read.

Both of these monographs offer important interdisciplinary views of young people's lives in Cuba today. They present ethnographically rich descriptions of Cubans' social, material and spiritual struggles amidst transforming socialism and new capitalist influences. Both also provide readers with a valuable view of the challenges of doing ethnographic research in Cuba. They will certainly appeal to a diverse audience interested in education, politics, economy, gender and race.

## REFERENCES

- Brotherton, Sean P.** 2012. *Revolutionary Medicine: Health and the Body in Post-Soviet Cuba*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Eckstein, Susan Eva** 1994. *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fernández, Damian J.** 2000. *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Fredrik, Laurie Aleen** 2005. Cuba's National Characters: Setting the Stage for Hombre Novísimo. *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 10 (2): 401–436.
- Guevara, Ernesto Che** 2005 [1965]. *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*. Melbourne: Ocean Press.
- Härkönen, Heidi** 2015. Negotiating Wealth and Desirability: Changing Expectations on Men in Post-Soviet Havana. *Etnográfica* 19 (2): 367–388.
- Härkönen, Heidi** 2016. *'Kinship, Love, and Life Cycle in Contemporary Havana, Cuba: To Not Die Alone.'* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

HEIDI HÄRKÖNEN  
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
hkharkonen@gmail.com